DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 225 070 CG 016 418

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TITLE Family Environment for Sexual Learning as a Function of Perceived Paternal Involvement in Household Care and Discipline.
PUB DATE May 82
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Midwestern Psychological Association (54th, Minneapolis, MN, May 6-8, 1982).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS College Students; *Discipline; *Family Environment; *Father Attitudes; Higher Education; Parent Child Relationship; *Parent Influence; *Parent Role; Sex Differences; *Sex Education; Sexuality
IDENTIFIERS *Coparenting

ABSTRACT

Although many parents view sexual instruction of children as the mother's responsibility, research indicates that an optimal family environment for sexual learning may be one in which both parents perceive themselves as participating equally in household and child care. To examine parental responsibility for family discipline, household and child care, the perceptions of 180 unmarried undergraduates who completed the Bem Sex Role Inventory, the Sexual Experiences Inventory, and the Sex Education Inventory were examined. Results confirmed that equal sharing of discipline by both parents accompanied a more favorable climate for sexual learning, characterized by greater affection, greater rapport, and freer discussion with both parents. Equal sharing of responsibility for household and child care was associated with a more supportive family environment. Variation in paternal roles had a greater impact on climate for sexual learning as perceived by daughters than by sons. The findings suggest that the factors governing family interactions and their outcomes are highly complex. (Author/JAC)

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ED225070

Family Environment for Sexual Learning as a Function of Perceived Paternal Involvement in Household Care and Discipline

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Presented at the Midwestern Psychological Association, Minneapolis, May, 1982

CG 016418

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METHOD

Subjects

180 students (106 males, $\bar{x}$ age = 18.6; 74 females, $\bar{x}$ age = 18.3) at a Commonwealth Campus of The Pennsylvania State University participated in the study. All subjects were unmarried, and 95% had resided with both parents while in high school (4% of each sex had resided with mother only, 1% with father only or mother and father alternately). The majority of subjects came from families in which both parents had completed high school or some college. Their parents' occupations varied widely, but most fathers were employed as managers, skilled workers, or foremen, and those 54% of the mothers who were not fulltime homemakers were generally employed as clerical or sales workers.

Instruments

The Sex Education Inventory (SEI) is a modified form of the survey instrument described previously by Bennett and Dickinson (1980). It ascertains students' perceptions of the pattern of parental responsibility for discipline and household care in their families while they were growing up. The SEI also measures preferred and actual sources of sex education as well as the following indices of family environment for sexual learning: affection in the family, permissiveness for expression of sexuality, rapport with each parent, and discussion of sex-related topics with each parent (including discomfort and other factors discouraging such discussion).

The Sexual Experiences Inventory (SEXI) measures heterosexual involvement in the past two years on four recognized subdimensions of attitude toward premarital sexual permissiveness: deep kissing, light petting, heavy petting, and sexual intercourse (Reiss, 1964; Spanier, 1977). A Guttman-scaled score for sexual activity was developed (Coefficient of Reproducibility = .99).

Test-retest reliability of these scales was assessed over a 4-week period in an independent sample and found to be acceptable ($\tilde{x}$ coefficient of stability $\underline{r}$ = .75, range = .58-.95). Median percentage of agreement for the nominal scales indicating parental division of household responsibilities was 79%.

The Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI, Bem, 1974) measures masculinity, femininity, and sex-role orientation based on the subject's endorsement of positively-valued masculine and feminine characteristics. Scores for masculinity and femininity were derived from 10 items of each type following Bem's instructions (1978).

Procedures

Students voluntarily completed the SEI, SEXI, and BSRI on the first day of class in one of two courses: Introductory Biology and Human Sexuality. All instruments were administered by the course instructor under the supervision of the investigator.

To examine indices of home environment for sexual learning as a fuction of paternal roles, one way analysis of variance and a posteriori comparisons of group means were computed separately for each sex on each of the SEI, SEXI, and BSRI scales. Comparisons were made across three patterns of parental responsibility for discipline: 1) mother mostly responsible, 2) mother and father equally responsible, and 3) father mostly responsible. Comparisons were also made across three patterns of responsibility for household and child care: 1) mother completely responsible, 2) mother mostly responsible, and 3) mother and father equally responsible.

Supplementary analyses were done to provide additional information about subject's attitudes toward parental involvement in sex education and same-sex, opposite-sex patterns of parent-child communication about sexuality.

Results

The modal pattern of responsibility for discipline was one of equal sharing by mother and father, accounting for 48% of the responses of both male and female students. Male students far more often perceived fathers than mothers as mostly responsible for discipline (41% cited fathers, 11% cited mothers), whereas female students perceived mothers as mostly responsible for discipline almost as often as fathers (27% cited fathers, 24% cited mothers). Male and female students differed significantly in this respect (χ^2 (1) = 6.71, $p < .01$).

Tables 1 and 2 report the statistically significant results of one way analysis of variance and a posteriori comparisons across three patterns of parental responsibility for discipline among female students. Girls who felt their parents shared the responsibility for family discipline equally reported significantly greater expression of affection in the family and greater rapport with their fathers than girls who felt their mothers were primarily responsible for discipline. Male students whose parents shared responsibility for discipline equally also reported significantly greater expression of affection in the family (Scheffé $p < .05$).

Female students whose parents shared responsibility for discipline discussed more sex-related topics with their fathers and were less sexually active than those whose mothers or fathers were primarily responsible for discipline. Female students whose parents shared responsibility for discipline also reported significantly less discomfort discussing sexuality with their mothers and fathers than those whose mothers were primarily responsible for discipline. Both male and female students whose parents shared responsibility for discipline reported significantly fewer factors discouraging discussion of sexuality with their fathers (Scheffé $p < .05$, both sexes) than students whose fathers were primarily responsible for discipline.

Mothers were perceived as being mostly responsible for household and child care by 54% of the male students and 49% of the

female students. The next most common pattern, cited by 33% of the male students and 31% of the female students, was parents sharing equal responsibility for household and child care. The least common pattern, cited by 16% of the male students and 20% of the female students, was that of mothers being completely responsible for household and child care.

The statistically significant results of one way analysis of variance and a posteriori comparisons across these three patterns of responsibility for household and child care among female students are reported in Table 3. As shown in the table, those girls who felt their fathers and mothers shared the responsibility equally reported significantly better rapport with their fathers than those whose mothers were completely responsible. Similar, nonsignificant trends were noted in the parallel data for male students, and those boys who felt their parents shared responsibility for household and child care equally discussed significantly more sex-related topics with their parents than those who felt their mothers assumed complete responsibility in these areas (Scheffé $p < .05$).

The BSRI indices of masculinity and femininity did not vary meaningfully as a function of paternal role in discipline or household care.

Supplementary analyses indicate that most students (50% of the males, 64% of the females) assigned parents the primary responsibility for teaching young people about sexual matters, but

that significantly more female students than male students (59% versus 39%) favored parental responsibility for those aspects of sexuality related to interpersonal relations (χ^2 (1) = 6.58, $p < .05$). For all students, professional sex educators were the preferred source of information about birth control, and physicians or nurses were the preferred source of information about venereal disease.

Consistent positive relationships were found between preference for parents as sources of sex education and extent of actual parental involvement. The number of aspects students indicated parents *should* be primarily responsible for was significantly correlated with the number of aspects (of 5) they reported their parents actually *were* primarily responsible for ($r = .32$, $p < .001$ for male students; $r = .47$, $p < .001$ for female students) and with the number of sex-related topics (of 16) they actually discussed with each parent ($r = .40$, $p < .001$; $r = .24$, $p < .01$; $r = .24$, $p < .05$; and $r = .15$, $p < .05$ for father-daughter, mother-son, father-son, and mother-daughter combinations, respectively).

The pattern of parent-child communication indicated by number of topics discussed was similar to that reported elsewhere (e.g. Bennett and Dickinson, 1980; Finkelhor, 1980.) Mothers and daughters discussed most topics ($\bar{x}$ = 7.5 topics) followed by fathers and sons ($\bar{x}$ = 2.4 topics), mothers and sons ($\bar{x}$ = 2.1 topics) and fathers and daughters ($\bar{x}$ = 1.3 topics).

CONCLUSIONS/IMPLICATIONS

Family environment for sexual learning as indicated by measures of affection, permissiveness for expression of sexuality, rapport with parents, and discussion of sexual topics with parents was found to vary significantly as a function of paternal involvement in household care and discipline. In general, a more positive climate for sexual learning marked by greater affection, greater rapport, and freer discussion with both parents was found where fathers were perceived as sharing equal responsibility with mothers. Indices of climate for sexual learning were found to vary more markedly as a function of paternal responsibility for discipline than for household and child care, and extent of paternal responsibility in both areas had a greater impact on environment for sexual learning as reported by female than by male students.

The factors governing family interactions and their outcomes are extraordinarily complex. This study, based on retrospective data for a very limited series of questions, conveys only a hint of the dynamics involved in producing an optimal family environment for sexual learning. Above all, the findings indicate that the sexual training of children can no longer safely be viewed as solely the mother's responsibility, and the outcome of sexual training can no longer be viewed as solely a function of her roles in the home environment.

Table 1

Mean Scores on Family Interaction, Sexual Discussion and Sexual Activity Scales for Female Students Reporting Three Patterns of Parental Responsibility for Discipline

	Discipline Pattern			F
	Mother (18)	Mo-Fa Equally (36)	Father (20)	Ratio
Family Interaction				
Affection	7.9_a	10.9_a	9.7	3.39^{***}
Rapport/Fa	12.8_a	20.9_a	16.6	8.85^{***}
Sexual Discussion				
Topics/Fa	1.4	3.8	1.8	3.56^{*}
Discomfort/Fa	3.4_a	2.4_a	3.1	5.32^{**}
Discouragement/Fa	2.7	1.8_a	3.1_a	4.46^{**}
Discomfort/Mo	3.3	1.3	2.1	3.38^{*}
Discouragement/Mo	2.2	1.3_a	2.3_a	4.83^{**}
Sexual Activity	2.4	1.6	2.3	3.46^{*}

Note. Mo=Mother, Fa=Father. Numbers in parentheses are group ns. Only variables with a significant F ratio for the one way analysis of variance across groups are reported. Common subscripts (a,b) identify group means differing significantly at $p<.05$ by Scheffé's test.
$^{*}p<.05$. $^{**}p<.01$. $^{***}p<.001$.

Table 2

Mean Scores on Family Interaction and Sexual Discussion Scales for Female Students Reporting Three Patterns of Parental Responsibility for Household and Child Care

	Responsibility Pattern			F
	Mother Only (14)	Mother Mostly (34)	Mo-Fa Equally (22)	Ratio
Family Interaction				
Rapport/Fa	11.5_{ab}	18.2_a	21.6_b	8.85^{***}
Sexual Discussion				
Permissiveness	3.0_a	3.5	4.5_a	4.03^{*}
Discomfort/Fa	3.7_a	2.7	2.2_a	5.98^{**}

Note. Fa=Father. Numbers in parentheses are group ns. Only variables with a significant F ratio for the one way analysis of variance across groups are reported. Common subscripts (a,b) identify group means differing significantly at $p<.05$ by Scheffé's test.
$^{*}p<.05$. $^{**}p<.01$. $^{***}p<.001$.

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